

Pooley. (J. H.)

THE PHYSICAL OR IMMEDIATE CAUSE
OF THE
DEATH OF CHRIST.

By J. H. POOLEY, M. D.
OF YONKERS, N. Y.

The death of Christ is the grand central fact and truth of the Bible. To it all the lines of the Old Testament Scriptures *converge*, from it all those of the New *diverge*. It stands central and sublime, like the sun in the midst of our solar system. If it could be disproved, the Christian religion would crumble into ruin. But it is not only the grandest, it is also the most certain and well attested of all facts. The bitterest opponents of our religion, whether Jew or Infidel, have never presumed for a moment to deny or doubt it. Whether accepted by men in the full significance which God intended it to convey or not, it yet challenges the attention, the wonder, the respect, of all men by its grandeur and its mystery. Even Rousseau was driven to the utterance so well known and so often quoted: "If Socrates died like a philosopher, Jesus Christ died like a God."

If such feelings are excited in the professed enemies of religion by its contemplation, what emotions must fill the soul of the Christian as he draws near to meditate upon that *death* which opens to his faith and hope the gates of *life eternal*!

What holy reverence, what swelling gratitude, what a loving, tender solemnity does it beget. Calvary is indeed to him holy ground on which he almost

fears to tread ; its wondrous incidents seem to be almost too sacred to be scanned with curious and critical eye. And yet we may carry this feeling, however natural and commendable in itself, too far ; we do carry it too far if it prevents us endeavoring to understand, as far as we may, everything connected with that tremendous scene. We propose, therefore, to treat of a subject which has recently been brought prominently before the Christian world, and inquire : What was the immediate physical cause of Christ's death ? He died as a *man*. He not only bore our sorrows, but he also shared our nature ; and the dissolution of that nature must, as in the case of other deaths, have had an adequate and an ascertainable cause. We instinctively ask when we hear of the death of any one : "Of what did he die ?" and with reverence and due seriousness we may rightly make the same inquiry as to our Saviour's death.

The first and commonest—I suppose, the universal—answer of those unprepared for the question would be : "Why, He was crucified ; He died on the cross ; as far as the physical phenomena of His death are concerned, He died as other crucified persons died." This, I say, would be the answer most commonly received, but clearly it is not the true one.

For it is a fact patent to a very partial investigation that crucifixion never produced death so quickly as that of Christ occurred. The Saviour at the longest only hung upon the cross about six hours, whereas ordinarily one, two, three, or even five and six days elapsed before death was produced by crucifixion. The crucified died a most lingering death—of exhaustion, of thirst, of sleeplessness, even of hunger—unless, as was sometimes done, they were mercifully dispatched sooner by stabbing or breaking their bones. The persons executed in this way were not suspended by the pierced hands, as many supposed ; but there projected from the middle of the upright portion of the cross a short piece of wood on which the body was supported, or sat astride as it were ; and as no injury was done to any vital or important organ of the body, we see how slow and lingering must have been the death produced. Many days, as we have said, often elapsed ; and numerous authentic records could be adduced of individual cases to illustrate this fact, if it were necessary. Josephus even tells us of persons taken down from the cross after hanging there many hours, who, being properly cared for, lived and recovered. Among the Jews the bodies of malefactors were not allowed to remain suspended over night, but in accordance with the Mosaic law, they were taken down at nightfall. Accordingly, and because it was the day before the Sabbath, we find the chief priest requesting Pilate that the bodies of the thieves and of Jesus might be taken down from their crosses, and the soldiers came and brake the legs of the two

malefactors; but when they came to Jesus they brake not His legs, *because* He was dead without it; and when the thing was told to Pilate, who was surely a competent judge of what was usual in such cases, he marvelled that He was already dead. It was not, then, the ordinary sufferings of crucifixion which was the immediate cause of Christ's death; a crucified person dying in six hours was a thing unheard of. Something else, aside from or beyond this, must have acted as the efficient cause of our Saviour's death. What was it?

Four different answers have been given to this question, which I will now proceed to mention and briefly discuss:

First—Some say that the death of Christ was caused by the thrust of the Roman soldier's spear, which was inflicted while He was yet living. This opinion they derive from a reading in the Vatican MS. which has in Matthew xxvii. 50, these words: "But another taking a spear pierced His side, and there came forth water and blood; and Jesus crying out with a loud voice, expired." We may dismiss this opinion by saying that the passage upon which it is based is an interpolation, and therefore it falls to the ground. All critics of any authority regard the passage in question as spurious—as it differs from all the best and most ancient MSS., and is flatly contradicted by the statement of John, an eye-witness of the scene, who says in his Gospel, chap. xix. 33-34: "But when they came to Jesus, and saw that He was dead already, they brake not His legs; but one of the soldiers with a spear pierced His side, and forthwith came there out blood and water."

This opinion never had many adherents, and now, I believe, has none; we need not, therefore, dwell upon it any further.

Second—It is said that our Saviour gave up the ghost, or dismissed His spirit voluntarily, and by an act of His own will as the absolute Lord of life and death. Of this view have been many learned and pious men—among whom we may enumerate Tertullian, Lightfoot, Bishop Taylor, Matthew Henry, Dr. Gill, Dr. Doddridge, Adam Clarke, and many others.

But to this, which may be called the miraculous theory of Christ's death, I can by no means assent.

Two classes of Scripture proof are urged in its support—first, the vigor the Saviour displayed just the moment before death, and the phrase He makes use of coupled with that of the evangelist in describing His death: "Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit," and He gave up the ghost;" and His previous declarations: "I lay down My life of Myself; no man taketh it from Me; I

have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this commandment have I received of My Father," and others like it. We answer, in the first place, the strength and vitality of the Saviour just before His death may be much better accounted for in another way, as will be seen further on. As to the words, "Father, into Thy hands," &c., and "He gave up the ghost," for this argument they prove too much, for the very self-same words are used by and of other dying persons in the Bible. They are simply the dying expressions of a pious man to whom death is a passage to his God and Father, and the ordinary Jewish circumlocution for death; nothing more; and to attempt to build such an argument upon them as has been done here, is puerile in the extreme. With regard to the Saviour's declarations, "I lay down My life of Myself," &c., they are simply a declaration that He voluntarily submitted to His sufferings and death—which nobody pretends to deny. They are equivalent to His declaration to Peter, "Thinkest thou not that I could now pray to My Father, and He would give Me more than twelve legions of angels?" or to Pilate, "Thou couldst have no power over Me at all except it were given thee from above." Christ was not forced or driven to the work of redemption, but voluntarily, of His own good will, "for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame."

The view we are discussing is fatal to the doctrine of the *vicarious* death of Christ. How can He be said to have died in our room and stead, or indeed to have *died* at all, if He voluntarily, by an exercise of Divine and miraculous power, dismissed or removed His soul from His body? Was this tasting death for every man? Moreover, the New Testament Scriptures everywhere assert that He was killed, put to death, died, was obedient unto death, &c. Peter accused the Jews of having slain Him, so did Stephen. If Jesus thus miraculously left the world, all this is but solemn trifling. Again, for Christ thus to deprive Himself of life, even in a miraculous manner, is a sort of suicide and a desertion of His appointed work as a Redeemer, not the obedience even to the death of the cross spoken of by the Apostle to the Hebrews.

Besides, it is not in consonance with the life of Him who daily performed miracles for others, none for Himself. To say, as some have done, that He *could not* die in any other way is simply to deny His true humanity, and needs no answer. For the above reasons this explanation must, I think, be abandoned, and we must look further for the true answer to our question.

Third—A third answer to our question attributes our Saviour's death to exhaustion produced by His mental sufferings, added to the physical pain of crucifixion.

This is a far better explanation than any hitherto considered, though not, in my apprehension, the most satisfactory that can be given. The mental agony of the Son of Man was indeed great beyond all human comprehension—a weight of woe to which all human sufferings are as nothing.

He who carried our griefs and bore our sorrows, sounded a depth of anguish to which this world affords not the faintest parallel. It cannot be exaggerated, and undoubtedly hastened if it did not directly produce His death, but not in the way here contended for.

The supporters of this opinion refer to His previous agony in the Garden as having already worn upon His system so as really to have weakened it beyond the power of enduring much further suffering. But let it be borne in mind that great as this was—so intense as to have forced from His body great drops of sweat in the open air on a night so cold as to have demanded a fire indoors—it was terminated by supernatural ministry and assistance, and when it passed left no trace of its effects; the suffering Saviour exhibited before the soldiers sent to apprehend Him, and through all the trying scenes of His mock trial before the high priest, Herod and Pilate, the utmost dignity and self-possession. At the time of His death, Jesus—who, we are to bear in mind, was perfect in body as in soul—was in the flower of His age, and in the full enjoyment of that health which had been promoted by a life of temperance and out-door exercise.

In such a case, *exhaustion* from mental suffering could not have come on so soon; it is essentially a slow process, producing death only after a long period of previous lowering of the vital powers. Again, the mental sufferings of our Saviour were not of the *character* to produce exhaustion. This comes rather from the melancholy, gloomy, brooding, depressing sorrows of the mind. His was a condition of active, powerful conflict of emotions—agony or wrestling, as it is well denominated. The nameless, fathomless horror of that dark hour when His Father's face was hidden, though not to be fully understood by man, may be supposed to have given rise to the desire to escape such ineffable woe—fighting against the counter desire to undergo it, and so accomplish the redemption of ruined men, according to the will of God, for which purpose came He to this hour; and thus He, who was above all principalities and powers, “learned the obedience of a son.” This was a struggle rather than exhaustion. Furthermore, the energetic and loud exclamations of the Saviour during the last moments of His life, and in the very article of death, are incompatible, it seems to me, with the supposition that He died of exhaustion. Lastly, this view of the case, as do both the others, leaves one of the most

extraordinary incidents of the crucifixion—the flowing of the blood and water from the pierced side of the Saviour, as recorded by the eye-witness John—altogether unaccounted for. Hence we feel bound to reject this explanation, as well as those previously considered.

In the year 1847 Dr. William Stroud, a learned and pious English physician, after, as he tells us, twenty-five years of study and preparation, published a work intended to prove that the Saviour died from *rupture of the heart* caused by His mental agony and conflict.

This view had been previously hinted at by others, but never before distinctly stated, elaborated and defended. It has recently attained notoriety from its adoption by Dr. Hanna in his delightful “Life of our Lord;” and, in consequence, Dr. Stroud’s book, the original edition of which is scarce, has lately been republished by the Appletons, in New York. After such study as I have been able to give the subject—reading pretty much all that has been written upon it, and verifying most of Dr. Stroud’s references—I feel constrained to adopt this view as best explaining our Saviour’s sudden death, and agreeing perfectly with all the recorded incidents connected therewith. Without entering minutely into the scientific questions connected with this theory, I will briefly explain its nature and bearings, and my reasons for adopting it.

It is well known to physicians that rupture of the heart, though rare, does sometimes occur; so that to us, dying of a broken heart is something more than a metaphor, it may be a sad reality. This accident may occur, and probably does most frequently occur, in diseased conditions of the organ; but such cases do not demand our attention, for no disease or weakness can be predicated of that heart which was broken for us. But it may also occur in perfectly healthy conditions of the heart and the general system, and then is commonly produced by overwhelming emotions, particularly by opposite or conflicting emotions, quickly succeeding one another, or struggling together in the breast. Of the effect of such emotions upon the central organ of the circulation, we all know something; our heart, we say, is light, or heavy as lead, or ready to burst, and many will easily believe that if such sensations as they have occasionally experienced were much intensified, or long continued, death from this cause might really ensue. It is altogether probable that the sudden deaths recorded in ancient history, from intense and contending passions of the mind—such as that of Chilo the Lacedemonian, Sophocles the Tragedian, and that of Diogenes, as recorded by Aulus Gellius—were caused in this way.

But we are not left to mere inference and conjecture in this matter; there are not wanting well attested modern instances where sudden death in healthy

persons has occurred under such circumstances, and a *post mortem* examination has revealed the fact of rupture or laceration of the heart. Let me now direct attention more minutely to the phenomena observed in such an examination.

The heart and roots of the great vessels which arise from it are enclosed in a membranous bag or sac, called the *pericardium*, which has no external opening whatever, but is perfectly closed or shut.

Upon opening the chest of a person who has died from rupture of the heart, the first thing observed is this pericardium or heart sac more or less distended, sometimes enormously so, by the blood which has been forced into it through the opening in the ruptured heart. The blood thus contained in the pericardium undergoes in a short time the process of coagulation or congealing, just as it would do outside of the body, in a bowl for instance, and separates into two parts—a clear light colored fluid called *serum*, and a thicker red portion called *crassamentum* or clot—or, to express it in popular language, blood and water—this very phrase indeed being used even in medical accounts of such cases. This is no mere theoretical description derived from reading, for I myself have witnessed what I now describe. Some years ago I made a *post mortem* examination of a man who died suddenly of rupture of the aorta, one of the great vessels of the heart, within the pericardium. The pericardium in this case contained a large quantity—fully a pint, I should think—of fluid; and on being opened there flowed out, side by side, without mingling, a clear fluid like water, and a thicker, dark-red fluid like blood.

What the knife of the physician does in an ordinary examination was roughly performed in our Saviour's case by the soldier's spear; and in the one case as in the other, there came forth blood and water. In this way, and in this way only, have I ever been able to account in my own mind for the blood and water, which, it seems to me, must have been considerable in quantity to have attracted the attention of the Apostle John, and been by him deemed worthy of special record.

All other attempts to explain it, I may simply say, without stopping to specify them, are far-fetched and improbable. Death from rupture of the heart occurs suddenly, and often when the powers of mind and body are active, the former generally in convulsive exercise. Such persons generally bring their hands suddenly and forcibly to the chest, and utter a loud cry.

These phenomena, except the movement of the hands which were fixed upon the cross, correspond with what we are told of our Saviour's death.

One further consideration confirmatory of the view we have taken, I deem worthy of a passing notice. All the types of the Old Testament sacrifices, and all the allusions of the New, point to and speak of the Saviour's death as accompanied by a copious effusion of blood. In the old dispensation, the victim to be offered was slain by dividing the great blood-vessels of the neck, and rapidly draining the whole system of its blood. In the New Testament it is said Christ's blood was shed, poured out, &c. We are washed in His blood, in the fountain of His blood, &c. Now the death of the cross, as ordinarily inflicted, was not a bloody death—indeed, it was singularly free from bloodshed. The nails that pierced the hands and feet passed through tendinous parts, almost destitute of blood vessels. Such punctured wounds in any situation bleed but little; and the nails or spikes, by closing the very wounds they caused, would make it still less, so that a few trickling drops was all—surely very little in correspondence with the metaphors and statements of Holy Writ. But if the crucified Son of God died, as we believe, of a ruptured heart, then indeed He poured out His blood for us—His most precious blood—His life's blood—His heart's blood.

To conclude, here as everywhere where the test is applied, we find that science, so far from contradicting revelation, only strengthens while it illustrates it.

And is not, I would ask, the view here presented a grand and noble one? And does it not invest that awful scene with additional significance and sublimity? What a wondrous spectacle is this to contemplate! The incarnate Son of God, after enduring for years the contradiction of sinners and the spite and enmity of men, submits voluntarily to be condemned as a malefactor and blasphemer, to be nailed to the accursed tree, and there a spectacle to men and angels to abide not only the wrath of brutal and infuriated men, but also the heavier wrath of God, until his human nature could endure no more, though strengthened by the Divinity within; but amid convulsions of nature, signs in the heavens above and the earth beneath, that mighty heart of love bursts beneath the load of agony; and pouring out in a copious stream His life's blood for our redemption, with a loud soul-piercing cry, the Lord of Glory dies!